

# Pro tips for SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes....

A few suggestions for more responsible representations of Indigenous peoples in speculative fiction

Some reflections on the possibilities, pitfalls, stakes, and responsibilities of writing about Indigenous people in various genres, especially speculative fiction. By Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation citizen), fantasy novelist, Indigenous literature scholar, and cultural historian living on unceded Musqueam territory on the west coast of the lands claimed by Canada. Lifelong learner born and raised outside the Nation. [@justicedanielh](https://twitter.com/justicedanielh); [imagineotherwise.ca](http://imagineotherwise.ca).



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: please understand, you're part of 500+ yrs of representation. Most of it is dehumanizing.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: forget the ig/noble savages--create complex political agents who love, laugh, struggle.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: land isn't just a setting for action, but complex network of subjectivities. Land matters.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: forget the "nature magic"--go for relational engagements w/complex beings and realities.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: skip the monocultures--go for diverse, complex, contested cultures and politics.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: colonial heteropatriarchy has shaped dominant gender norms. Be imaginative & empathetic.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: avoid simplistic "torn between worlds" motif. Identity is richer and far more complicated.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: not all Indigenous people have the benefit of being raised within our cultures and traditions. Sometimes we're figuring it out, too. That doesn't make our experience less real or authentic--it simply speaks to our diversity and complexities. And our communities have *always* been diverse and complex.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: educate yourself re: real histories AND contemporary realities. We outlived 19th century.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: if your authorities are 19th c. ethnographers, you're in trouble. We're here now. Listen.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: if protagonist is a white man gone Native, you're in trouble. This ain't Dances w/Wolves.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: the "Indian" of the nineteenth-century "frontier" was a literary, artistic, and military construction completely disconnected from reality and mobilized to destroy real Indigenous peoples and lay claim to our lands. Because Indians steadfastly refused to just vanish (as white commentators had insisted would happen for years), these stereotypes served to symbolically if not physically erase our nations from the present. Every lazy regurgitation of these stereotypes simply replicates and reinforces that awful history and its catastrophic legacies. We existed before the nineteenth century--we exist today. Be more creative.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: if all you know is dreamcatchers, tricksters, & medicine wheel, better get to researching.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: there's no such thing as a generic "Native"--we belong to specific, complex peoples.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: needn't be Indigenous to represent us well, but you sure as hell better do your research.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: Part of research is engagement with real people and real perspectives, not just archives. We're part of the world, not apart from it. Listen to us. And don't look for the one or two voices that confirm your easy stereotypes--consult widely and get a sense of the full richness of perspectives and understandings. Your work will be immeasurably richer as a result.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: representing marginalized peoples comes w/responsibilities. Don't be an entitled jerk.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: if Indigenous folks express concern about your representation, be thoughtful in response.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: we're not expecting perfection--we'd really like something beyond dominant stereotypes.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: it's not up to us to do your research for you, but there are *many* reliable and responsible resources out there (some of which are on our websites and Twitter feeds), and some of us are even willing to point the way if treated with respect. Just don't expect us to be available 24-7 for your enlightenment, or get pissy when we focus on other priorities. We want you to do a great job, but we're not always in the business of teaching you.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: if all you've got are stereotypes, you're not a very imaginative writer. Show more depth.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: don't avoid Indigenous topics/characters--challenge yourself & others. Shift the template.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: if the status quo of your world is based on Eurowestern cultures,

socio-political structures, and ideologies, you're treading well-worn paths to perhaps overfamiliar places. White Europeans and their colonial kin are a small minority in our own world--why should whiteness be the dominant template for fantasy in the 21st century?



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: don't jump to knee-jerk "free expression" defence when challenged. Step up, listen, learn.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: we WANT you to succeed--it's good for everyone. But we also want you to listen & learn.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: we're not looking for only positive depictions, but given the fact that the overwhelming majority of representations are negative, we always appreciate the characters and stories that depict us as complex human beings with a range of motivations and experiences. And those come from folks who do their work, who listen, and who are generous of spirit. Anything less isn't enough.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: the dominant ideas about Indigenous peoples are colonial stereotypes. Be more imaginative.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: representation is never neutral. Dominant stereotypes have material consequences.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: judges, police & lawyers mobilize stereotypes to take children, steal lands, incarcerate.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: if Indigenous ppl are in your story only for primitivist colour, be more imaginative.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: you're writing into a bigger context. Understand it. Challenge yourself & your writing.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: we've been dehumanized by settler-colonial fantasies for 500+ yrs. You can do better.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: our communities are still rebuilding after hundreds of years of loss, often in the face of public disdain and wilfull ignorance. Your representations can either hinder or help those efforts. Make the better choice.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: we don't expect perfection. But basic decency & some research don't seem too much to ask.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: great resources out there to help avoid common problems, esp [@NativeApprops](#) & [@debreese](#).

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: "You should just be grateful we write about you people at all" isn't the way to respond to thoughtful critique and concerns. That's troll logic. Don't be a troll.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: Indigenous ppl are complex, diverse, & contemporary--our representations should be, too.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: be imaginative, be humble, be kind. Do better, and you'll lift up hearts & minds.

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: Provide mentorship/support/advocacy for under-represented writers, whether or not you're from that community. Sometimes the best show of support and respect is to step back & encourage Indigenous writers to be centred in the discussion.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: no one always gets it right. The difference is, do you change, or just retreat/attack?

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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: if you run away or freak out when you're challenged, why are you writing? Do you write for ego-stroking praise and gratitude, or for real understanding & communication? Do better. If you imagine for a living, you can imagine in better, smarter ways.



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SF/fantasy writers interested in "Native" themes: Indigenous people read & write in the field--it's ours, too, & we deserve better.



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